

What If

by nycforme

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Summary: AU where Claude homes from war. The tribes reactions/Berger dealing with growth, time, and change. M for smut.

What If

He comes back different than how he left, but that was expected. He's still there though, under a layer of confusion and fragileness is the same beautiful Claude. He keeps his hair short still, not buzzed like when he left, but still short. It takes Sheila a few weeks to realize his beautiful gold locks aren't growing out, and then one night when she's up studying she sees him disappear into the bathroom with a pair of silver scissors that she doesn't recognize. It's ok though, she reasons, if that's what he's used to now. As long as Claude's happy.

It's fine, she reassures herself, because her Claude is home. And he's healthy, hardly a scratch on his lithe body that he hadn't left with. He's come home all in one piece with a smile on his face and offering hugs to each of them. When he puts his arms around her for the first time she can't help but break down into tears, she promised she wouldn't. He'd made her promise that she wouldn't cry, but there she was, face buried in his worn green jacket and hands clinging tightly to his neck as he rocks her back and forth. Claude doesn't offer words of comfort, but he doesn't have to, his lips on her ear are enough.

There are little changes that they all recognize too, the changes are small and irrelevant, but Berger notices them. The fact that Claude isn't growing his hair out drives Berger crazy, but it doesn't bother him as much as it does to see Claude walking around in black socks. They ride up to his shins and manage to stay there, even when he goes out into the moonlit kitchen at night his socks are up, tight around his pale legs. Berger doesn't say anything, nobody does, but the small changes hurt more than they should. It takes a lot of will power for Berger not to point out that this isn't the army, that nobody expects Claude to sit properly at the table and scarf down his

meal in a matter of seconds. They have all the time in the world, there's no reason for their meals to be timed down to three minutes, but Berger follows Huds advice and let's Claude eat where and how he likes.

It's easy for them to imagine him out in the fields, sitting in his ditch or tent or on the ground with his meal in front of him. He scarfs it down soundlessly, neatly, as if his last meal should be quick and proper. Jeannie finds it hard to walk into the apartment and see Claude sitting on the couch, a good foot between Sheila and him, in jeans and a black shirt. She'd never seen him in dark clothing, frankly he looked ridiculous, but she doesn't tell him that. Instead she tries to sit next to him, curled up in his lap like he used to let her. She shows him her daughter Claudette, a small giggling girl with blonde waves that frame green eyes, and his eyes tear up. Woof looks away in embarrassment, but she stares on, seeing pain flash in the brown eyes she once knew so well. She knows he wanted to be there, still wants to be a part of Claudette growing up.

"She's beautiful." He offers with a watery smile, toddler awkwardly perched in his lap. The baby giggles and babbles up at him, pudgy hand reaching out to touch his chest. Claude hands her back with a shake of his head, he doesn't come out of Berger's room for the rest of the night.

But it's fine, they all reason, because he's home. And he's healthy. And he's still their loving, gentle, kind Claude. But it's not fine, Berger realizes, because Claude is hurt in more ways they can imagine. He smokes every night before bed, the same way he used to, but then he just lays there. On the other side of the bed, blanket neatly folded across his chest, not curling towards Berger the way he used to when they shared the bed years ago. Claude wasn't hurt or surprised by them giving his room to Hud and Woof, instead he brags that Berger is offering to share a bed. "Berger hasn't offered to share anything but his body in all his life," Claude jokes the first day he arrives, dropping his light bag onto Berger's bed with a grin.

The two years have taken a toll on him though, Berger concludes. Claude's grown up, more than the rest of them have besides maybe Jeannie, and part of growing up is not depending on a warm chest to sleep on. Growing up is not needing to feel your lover's breath on your face before you drift off to sleep. Growing up meant Claude not needing Berger, or maybe he just doesn't want him. The thought destroys Berger but he doesn't want to disturb the peacefully sleeping body so he sits and stares.

So unlike the Claude he once knew, Claude sleeps on his back with his hands relaxed by his sides. If Berger didn't know better he'd say he was lifeless, but he can see the navy shirt rise and fall with each breath. Berger moves closer, the sheets rustling in the cool night as he presses closer so he can get a good look at Claude's face. The tan is there and lips are as thin as ever, chapped now in a way that looks painful. Berger finds himself wanting to take that pain away, wanting to rub Claude's back the way he used to, and kiss his forehead the way that used to calm his worried eyes. He dips down and presses a soft kiss to the lips, with his eyes closed he can fall back to the way it used to be, when it was nothing to kiss a sleeping friend's lips in the dark. But Claude has changed.

He jumps awake with a gasp and pushes Berger backwards off the bed, he sits up cursing. Fear and confusion written across his face, Berger watches from the ground as Claude's brown eyes dart around the room. Looking for danger, looking for the enemy.

"Claude, I-I'm sorry, it's just me, man." Berger sits on the cold floor for a moment, waiting for a response. Hoping for an embarrassed laugh that would be so common from his old Claude, or maybe even curse and apology with some sort of explanation.

"You scared me." Is all Berger gets. And it sends him over the edge.

"I scared you? You scared me, man. For two years." He feels himself standing up, crouching on the bed, crawling up to straddle a shaking Claude.

"What?" Claude's chapped lips part in a gasp when Berger reaches out and runs his hand through what's left of Claude's soft hair.

"I missed you, Claudio. And now you're here, I can have you. I don't have to worry about you," Claude tries to jerk his head away from Berger's large hand but Berger gently uses both hands to frame his innocent face, "and all I want is to love you like I used to." He bends to bring their lips together and is relieved that Claude lets him.

Relief is the only way to describe it. Pain from the past two years is being stripped from his heart as Claude kisses him back hesitantly. Shaking hands hold his shoulders, a rattling gasp is emitted when Berger cups his neck lovingly, a shove is directed at his chest when he reaches to pull Claude's shirt above his head.

"Stop!" The strict order startles him, and Berger freezes. The blue cotton is already half way above Claude's thin chest and Berger sees what Claude is trying to hide.

"Claude-" Berger pulls the shirt away, anyways. Leaving Claude shirtless in the large bed, a small purple scar above his heart.

"No!" He looks frantic, a long arm reaching out to grab the shirt and thin fingers clasped over the scar, "Please, Berger, please give it back. If you ever cared about me, you'd give me the fucking shirt." Berger hands it back silently and watches as Claude struggles to put it on with a hand clasped to his chest, it's a few moments of awkward silence before Claude is fully dressed, again.

"What happened?" Berger asks, still straddling his thin waist.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You got shot in the fucking chest, you have to talk about it." He reaches out again, this time slowly, and pulls the shirt up. He feels Claude's chest heave under his fingers as he pulls the cotton away, and Claude's breath is hot against his face as he brings a finger to the purple scar. Nearly an inch away from the heart.

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes." Claude's voice shakes under the realization that it's the first time he's talked about it outside of the Medical Tent.

"What happened?"

"I asked to see God, then I asked to see you."

"Liar." Berger thumbs the scar mindlessly, staring up into the brown orbs, feeling himself sinking under Claude's tender gaze.

"No, I mean it." He presses his chapped lips to Berger, and the kiss deepens as the blue shirt hits the wooden floor. The moonlight dances across Berger's chest as he stands to pull his underwear down with a grin, Claude's heart jumps a little and his breath hitches as he looks up at his partner. So much has changed in two years, but this is still the same, Berger is still the same. It's been so long, Claude realizes as Berger pulls Claude's pajama pants and underwear down, since he's been with a man. He waits as Berger yanks his socks off, before he pulls Berger to him in a tight hug.

And he cries. It's the first time he's cried since his first night in Vietnam, and it feels good to feel Berger's arms around him as his chest heaves with ugly sobs as he tangles his shaking fingers in Berger's hair—the hair he dreamt of for months before he finally forgot what it felt like in between his fingers. But now he remembers, and would never have to forget.

Berger lays him gently back on the pillow and after what feels like hours of preparation, enters him with a soft sigh. They cling to each other as sweat forms between them, Berger's hair tickles Claude's neck as he thrusts deeply into him, and as Berger whispers Claude's name over and over with each thrust Claude remembers what home is. And so he's crying again. Silent tears pour down his face as they hold each other tightly in the darkness. Snow falls slowly outside the window, and Claude finds himself pressing his face into Berger's chest with a soft sigh as he forces himself not to remember the winters he spent anywhere but here, at home in Berger's embrace.

End  
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